

Dear Santa Fe County residents:

The last Board of County Commissioner meeting was a land use meeting, and it was a long one. We did not adjourn until 11 p.m. We had one quite controversial land use case: an application to amend the La Pradera development Master Plan. I will discuss in more detail below as to what the request was, how I voted and why.

Many of the other issues and agenda items that we considered were either not that interesting or are ones that I have written about in the past. So, I am just going to concentrate on two items that might be of interest: a new discount drug card available in the County and the purchase of a parcel of land for County open space.

Please let me know if you have any feedback on these issues -- or any others, for that matter.

Sincerely,
-Kathy

Open Space Purchase:

The Board approved the purchase of approximately 50 acres at the terminus of Brownell Howland Road for County open space. The exciting thing about this purchase is that there will be a trail constructed on the land that will connect the Dale Ball Trail Network with the Little Tesuque Creek County open space property. This trail will be a key link in our entire regional trail network.

The property was appraised at nearly \$1 million, but was purchased for only \$125,000 from the Santa Fe Conservation Trust (SFCT) to whom the property had been donated. As part of the purchase agreement, the SFCT has agreed to construct the 3-mile trail, and the trail will be designed so that it is built to U.S. Forest Service Standards.

This property was evaluated by the County Open Lands, Trails, and Parks Advisory Committee (COLTPAC). It was rated as the number one priority among a number of different properties that were under consideration. The reason for the high rating was the superior connectivity of this piece of land. It also has breathtaking views and will be a real jewel among our open space acquisitions.

I recused myself from this particular vote. My husband is on the Board of Directors of the SFCT and, as such, represents the entity. Since what was under consideration was the purchase of the property by the County from the Trust, I was advised by our Attorney that this constitutes a conflict of interest for me.

Drug Discount Card:

There is now a new free discount prescription card (Coast2Coast) available to any Santa Fe County resident. There is no paperwork to fill out, and the cards are available at County offices as well as various pharmacies (although you may have to ask for it at a pharmacy).

The card allows residents who use it to save up to 75% on both generic and brand drugs. It can often be used for drugs that are not covered under a particular health plan. Drug that are controlled substances, though, are not covered. Amazingly, certain prescriptions for pets are also included.

The card is primarily for people who do not have insurance that covers prescriptions. However, at times a particular drug will not be covered by a person's insurance, and the card can be helpful in that case. In addition, the card can be used in the situation in which a Santa Fe County resident hits the Medicare Part D "donut hole".

Discounts are also available for health services: dental, vision, hearing, laboratory and imaging. A person can save up to 60% on dental, vision, and hearing bills and from 50% to 80% on lab and imaging tests.

You may have heard that the County receives a fee each time the card is used. This is not the reason, though, that this card was chosen. In fact, the staff was in the process of comparing cards -- and this seemed the best one -- when they discovered that Santa Fe County would receive payments from card use. At that point, there was discussion as to whether we should put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) so that all companies offering these types of cards could compete for the contract.

For more information, you can visit the www.coast2coastrx.com website or the County website.

I have a number of the cards in my office, and I would be glad to mail you one. I also have a list of the pharmacies that accept it, although you can also find that information on the web site.

La Pradera:

The developers for the La Pradera neighborhood asked for an amendment to the La Pradera Master Plan that was approved about 6 years ago. They requested that one of the areas that had included commercial space be replaced with 17 single-family residential live-work lots. They also requested an increase in the density of lots in the rest of the development to create 27 new lots.

One final request was for the repeal of requirement that reclaimed water from the water treatment plants be sent back to the homes for toilet flushing and yard irrigation.

The Commission voted to approve the Master Plan Amendment as well as giving approval for the Preliminary and Final Plats.

The live-work lots will replace what had been planned to be around 33 thousand square feet of commercial area, a parking lot, and 11 condominiums.

The increased lot density will occur in Phases 2 through 6 of the development. It will be accomplished by redrawing the lot lines to add between 2 and 8 lots in each of the phases.

However, the amount of land in open space (around 50%) will stay the same, since the increase in lots will be accomplished by making the existing lots somewhat smaller.

There was a great deal of opposition to this amended plan from some of the people within La Pradera, but primarily from residents living in a neighboring development called Vista Ocaso.

The reason that I voted for the proposed change is that it seems to be more in line with the realities of the housing market in Santa Fe at this point in time. For one thing, the concept of commercial areas in new developments in the outlying County has not really worked out. It turns out that commercial enterprises need to be close to many residences in order to be viable.

Even the businesses in the center of the Rio Rancho subdivision have had a hard time making a go of it. For La Pradera, it is hard to see how commercial space would ever be viable. It is relatively close to town, so the people who live in that area would probably preferentially go to places where they could visit a number of businesses. On the other hand, live-work spaces have become increasingly popular in our area, especially in the current downturn. There are many people here with marketable skills, and the concept of having a home business has been a great alternative for people who have lost jobs or who cannot find jobs.

On the subject of smaller lots, I do not think that is an entirely bad idea. Originally, La Pradera was envisioned as a high-end community. Unfortunately, we in the country now equate high-end homes with large McMansion homes. However, there is a growing movement to build and live in smaller, high-quality homes. This makes sense from a number of perspectives. One of the advantages is that smaller homes can use less energy, especially if they are well-built. And if one is building a smaller home, one can afford to spend a bit more on the insulation that is required to have a truly energy-efficient residence. In addition, in the Santa Fe market, the most common buyer right now is the first-time home buyer. These buyers of entry-level homes cannot usually afford huge homes.

The original idea of sending reclaimed water back to the homes in order to water landscaping and flush toilets was a revolutionary and potentially visionary way to save water. Unfortunately, it did not quite work out the way that had originally been envisioned. Of course, one problem is that installing the plumbing for the return flow of treated effluent is very expensive. But there was also a lack of compliance by the homeowners in the rules of use for that treated wastewater. They were only supposed to use it as subsurface irrigation, and that did not always happen.

Under the new plan, the treated wastewater will still be used, but only for irrigation of the common areas. In any event, the water use in La Pradera continues to be quite low: around 0.12 acre-feet per year on average per residence. The installation of low-flow appliances and infrastructure in the homes has played an important role in the low water usage.

I know that the neighbors to La Pradera (who live on large lots themselves) had envisioned the development as being high-end homes on relatively large lots. However, the market will

currently just not support that vision. In fact, my belief is that the current market conditions will be in place for a number of years. It will take quite a while to clear out the excess inventory that was created during the housing boom that occurred in the last decade. In addition, who knows how long it will take to create healthy credit markets again?

I feel that the new plan for La Pradera has a better chance for success than sticking to the old one. In the end, if La Pradera is successful, that will help everybody's property values in that area.